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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TORONTO 000053

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SUBJECT: TORY WAFFLES AS ONTARIO'S CONSERVATIVES REGROUP

Classified By: Consul General John R. Nay for reason 1.4(d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Four months after their disastrous provincial election defeat, the Ontario Progressive Conservatives (PC) rewarded leader John Tory with a tepid endorsement at their 2008 Annual General Meeting (AGM). Slightly over two-thirds of the 1,300 delegates voted against initiating a search for a new PC leader, a historic low that has led previous conservative leaders to abandon their posts.

Tory, however, after a widely-criticized bout of indecision, interpreted the results as an endorsement of his leadership and vowed to continue to build the party in preparation for elections in 2011. Serious doubts remain about Tory's ability to unify the various wings of his party that are dissatisfied not only with his personal leadership style, but also with his ability to mediate programmatic disputes between Tory's "soft conservatism" and the rural, socially conservative base of the party. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) With Ontario's Progressive Conservatives (PC) still smarting over their embarrassing October 2007 election defeat, party leader John Tory apologized for failings in his leadership during the campaign. As he had done in countless political meetings across the province since October, Tory admitted that his decision to run the provincial campaign on a promise to direct state funding to non-Catholic parochial schools was a critical mistake. Tory asked for forgiveness, promised to more closely listen to the party's grass roots when formulating policy positions, and vigorously asserted that a prolonged leadership battle would only benefit the governing Liberals.

¶3. (U) The vote on Tory's leadership (technically a vote on whether the party should hold a formal leadership race and convention at a later date) revealed the shallow nature of Tory's hold on the party. Only 66.9% voted in support of Tory, matching the support for previous national Conservative leader Joe Clark, who resigned from party leadership after receiving an identical total in 1983.

¶4. (SBU) More damaging than the vote total, in the opinion of many delegates and commentators, was Tory's indecision following the announcement of the results. After announcing that he would need time to consider the results, he returned to the stage several hours later--after consulting with his wife and parliamentary caucus--to deem the results an endorsement of his leadership.

¶5. (SBU) The thunderous applause that greeted Tory's announcement could not paper over his indecisiveness when confronted with the lukewarm support of his party. In conversations with Poloff the day after, several Tory opponents indicated that while they grudgingly accepted Tory's decision, his seeming lack of spine when faced with the results was just another example of his weak leadership abilities.

¶6. (SBU) Sunday's campaigns for the ten-member Party Executive (responsible for the day-to-day administration of

the party) revealed the depth of discontent with Tory's administration of the party. Every candidate pledged to "return the party to its roots," and to increase the voice of average members in the policy formulation process. Though several candidates mentioned the importance of reaching out to Canada's "visible minorities," the meeting itself was striking in its lack of ethnic diversity. Candidates who railed against unresponsiveness and incompetence of the central party administration received sustained applause.

¶7. (C) Blair McCreadie, a Toronto attorney and outgoing President (chief administrative officer) of the PCs, told Poloff that Tory and his immediate staff were extremely pleased at the results of the convention and indicated that it could have been much, much worse. He predicted that as Tory moves away from the election debacle and his successful effort to rescue the party's finance; he will be able to focus more on the consultation and inclusiveness that the party rank and file desires.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: The results of the PC vote on Tory's leadership amply demonstrate the challenge he will face over the coming four years. The rural, socially conservative base craves consultation and involvement in setting the party's agenda. But the conservative wing of the party has proven itself to be unpalatable to voters in the Greater Toronto Area, where elections in Ontario are won and lost. If Tory overly accommodates the conservatives, he runs the risk of losing his moderate reputation that in theory should appeal to large segments of urban and liberal voters. His indecision in the face of his party's lukewarm support also fed lingering doubts about his tactical competency against Premier Dalton McGuinty and the Ontario Liberals. END COMMENT.

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